

Belonger Corporation, Inc.

Belonger Corporation, Inc., located in West Bend, was started by Jean Marie Thiel in March of 2000. Belonger is the only American Indian Woman owned mechanical contracting firm in the state of Wisconsin. They are a complete mechanical contractor in the specialty trades service industry providing HVAC commercial & industrial applications. Belonger provides 24-hour emergency HVAC/R service, as well as mechanical retrofits, remodeling, trouble shooting, design-build and preventative maintenance programs. They also offer construction management, general construction and diversified services to the federal market customers.



There were many economic, social, race and gender obstacles for Belonger to overcome. The industry and economy was not a favorable one when the business was started. They were not allowed "COD" accounts and some vendors refused to sell to them even on a cash basis. Now they have over 100 vendors with open account credit. Bonding was not allowed in the first years where now they have no aggregate limit. They could not secure steady income or health insurance but now maintain some basic coverage. Since no one knew who Belonger Corporation was, the forecast of failure was based upon bias and stereotypes, assumptions based upon the owner's personal characteristics solely.

SBA has been able to help the Belonger Corporation in several ways. They became an SBA 8(a) client in December of 2000; all their bonding is in an SBA Bonding Program; working capital was accomplished with an SBA guarantee; the SBA district office provided them CCR, FAR compliance and procurement assistance as well as marketing development and business seminars. The Wisconsin SBA office reviewed their 8(a) application, assisted them with their Joint Venture developments as well as supporting and developing their Mentor Protégé Agreement.

When Belonger started the business, there were three owner operators-one full-time and two part-time. There are now thirteen regular employees. In addition, in the beginning, Belonger employed in one county in Wisconsin and by 2004, their employee base involved eleven different states and one foreign country. They have provided employment to minorities, women, and veterans on a consistent level.

Belonger takes on complex and high-end projects and offers turnkey services, often operating as a Prime Contractor or General Contractor as well. They installed the second thermal loop system in the state of Wisconsin.

Belonger gives back to the community in the form of personal time and monetary support. They have provided answers, email, phone support and ownership counseling support to four different minority owned firms (two African American and two American Indian) in construction trades. From one-on-one support regarding certifications, federal contracting to advice on start-up concerns, bonding, and opportunities available for small loans.

They have participated in two round tables with the Milwaukee County Disadvantage Business Enterprise fair discussion panel as a minority and woman owned construction company. They were selected and participated in a discussion panel with SBA Administrator Hector V. Barreto at SBA's 50th Anniversary Regional event in Green Bay, Wisconsin. Belonger continually sponsors and provides monetary support to the American Indian Chamber of Commerce Wisconsin scholarship fund; supported the Illinois Chapter of MS Drive-Tour de Farms Bike-A-Thon-team Kroschell and contributed to the Beacon House in Fond du Lac Support Fund Raiser & Raffle a women's shelter.

Belonger has received various achievements/awards. In 2005, they won SBA's Wisconsin and Region V Minority Small Business Person of the Year award and were one of the Women of Influence named by the Business Journal. In 2004, they were the selected as the Wisconsin Minority business of the Year during MED week; received the "Future 50" award from the Milwaukee Metropolitan Area Commerce (MMAC), won the BECI Trail Blazer Award and was the first government approved mentor-protégé in the State of Wisconsin. In 2003, they received the "Future 50" award from MMAC and the Entrepreneurial award from the Washington Chamber of Commerce.

As evidenced above, Belonger has had to overcome some monumental obstacles to build their business and have it become a success. The SBA is extremely proud for the help it has been able to offer this business to overcome some of those obstacles and become the successful business they are. This business is an example to prospective small business entrepreneurs that they can also own their own businesses despite presumably insurmountable obstacles.